

June 22, 1961

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MEMORANDUM TO: Hon. Dean Rusk
Secretary of State

The President thought that you and
Mr. Kohler would be interested in this.

McGeorge Bundy

Attachment
(Memo for Pres. from
John Steele)

June 19, 1961

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MEMO FOR THE PRESIDENT

The Western resolve to "hold" Berlin in the face of a new challenge from Nikita Khrushchev is undoubted if the Soviet leader is foolish enough to mount his challenge with brute force. But on a basis of any Khrushchev challenge short of this fateful exercise in monumental stupidity, the West well could be "diddled" -- as Londoners put it -- out of the city.

This is the conclusion I draw from a ridiculously brief visit in England, but one which was marked with revealing disclosures at the Foreign Office, Defense Ministry, and among leaders of both the Conservative and Labor parties in Commons. I write this somewhat apologetically because of the brevity of my stay and because of the certainty that our reporters abroad know much more about the matter than do I. My only excuse is the possibility that a fresh, straight-from-Washington appraisal might be of some value.

One thing must be made clear first off. So far as I now know there is no basic split between London and Washington on the matter of not being forced from Berlin by unilateral Soviet action. In London, Labor and Conservative parties stand firm on this. Gaitskell has recouped his control from the unilateralist disarmers, and there is no reason to doubt the steadfastness of the Kennedy Administration in Washington.

But beyond this kind of unsophisticated posing of the Berlin question (an outright, massive Red power play does seem unlikely) there is a vast area, not of disagreement, but of indecision both in London and Washington. It represents not, at this stage, a London-Washington split, but a London-Washington failure to come up with a reasonable advance policy, or agreed upon contingency planning, prior to a likely fall crisis in Berlin.

Reports that Britain wants "out" in Berlin represent only a partial truth, one motivated by the apparent fact that the West hasn't agreed on how to stay "in" on Berlin.

There is a good deal of truth in the Foreign Office claim that London is not aware of specific political decisions in Washington concerning Berlin beyond the much reiterated and agreed upon position that we will not lose Berlin to unilateral Soviet action. The lack of a specific Washington, not to mention Washington-London agreement on Berlin policy is the major reason for Lord Home's visit to the U.S. last week. "We can't agree with you because we really don't know what you want us to agree on," is a constantly reiterated British governmental theme.

But to some considerable degree this is logic chopping designed to mask British objections, strongly held, to possible forthcoming U.S. policy recommendations.

There is, for instance, a basic British reluctance to go "automatic" on Berlin policy -- to agree in advance of trouble to a set of responses which would be either automatic or in military, rather than civilian governmental, hands. "We can't have an advance policy, set in concrete, when we don't know the nature of the Soviet challenge. We must not, we cannot afford to be, rigid," is the way an important Britisher put it last week.

But before one jumps to the conclusion that signifies a British "softness" as compared to a U.S. "hardness," it must be remembered that a key doctrine of the Kennedy Administration, one preached to us a month ago by Bob MacNamara, Paul Nitze and voiced by the President himself, is that of holding firm the command functions in civilian hands, of avoiding "automatic escalation" of trouble. This theory, held by the U.S. government, is very similar to British reluctance to give advance, firm political approval to military contingency planning. On the latter, by the way, there has been a high degree of Anglo-American military planning since 1958; representing a drawer full of military contingent proposals but not representing agreed upon high governmental policy.

In British minds there is absolutely no favor shown at all for proposals to answer a transportation blockade of Berlin by jamming an armored convoy over the autobahn, through Helmstedt and on into West Berlin. Firstly, "A couple of school marms could stop it," says one British military figure. Secondly, Britishers feel that Russia would reply with force, that the West thereby would assume the posture of the military aggressor, that the fight could not be contained within a narrow corridor, that World War III would ensue. Again, so far as we now know, this approach does not represent agreed U.S. governmental policy, although even as Lucius Clay favored it in 1948, top U.S. commanders in Europe favor it today. Of this, the British -- civilian and military -- want no part.

The British, and some of our own top people, do not foresee a clumsy and apocalyptic Russian crackdown in the form of a complete disruption some October day of air, canal, road and autobahn traffic into Berlin. If there is trouble, and most people we've talked to now expect it, it will come by a hot -- and -- cold manipulation of the transportation facilities into Berlin; a slow choke process. A bridge on the autobahn will be found in need of repairs; there will be sudden difficulties in clearing air traffic into Tempelhof; railroad trackage will be found in dire need of repair. This is the danger, not the big and loud Soviet push which would result in clear, hard Western retaliation.

The British, while seeking to avoid hard military advance commitments, see a couple of areas where advance military preparation is possible. They desire, in event of a heightening crisis in Berlin, to see a very real NATO mobilization, a moving of troops eastward, a return of American fighter-bombers to France, the quitting of the garrison towns of West Germany and a pinwheeling of troops into the north and easterly areas. Beyond this, they foresee actual mobilization within the NATO countries as well. "We'll have time, this thing isn't going to happen overnight; thirty days, sixty days, maybe more," is the refrain. Secondly,

airlift is not being written off in British circles despite the testimony of some U.S. military men that the prospect of an effective airlift in view of radar jamming devices is most dim. Airlift, not far different from the 1948 model, is seen by the British as an attractive possibility to gain time while negotiations are carried forward. The West Berlin military garrisons could thus be supplied, runs the British rationale, and emergency civilian goods flown in. Britishers cite Willy Brandt as authority for their belief that though the normal civilian economy would be disrupted, there are sufficient basic supplies on hand in West Berlin to "see the city through" a considerable number of months. Thirdly, Britishers see something to be gained in an early buildup of conventional Western forces in West Germany. They cite reports that the U.S. is prepared to send an additional 6,000 troops to Germany (news to us). They think that even Britain can sustain an additional British division on the continent for a limited time despite "our trade balance troubles" and expiration of national service next year.

Emphatically, the British seek to avoid any commitment that could mean nuclear war over Berlin -- save as an unavoidable answer to the least likely Soviet tactic -- overt use of clumsy, brute force on the Berlin approaches. There are signs, too, that Washington shares this attitude in the top reaches of the government. There are signs that this does not represent an Anglo-American split -- though maybe it should.

Britishers are quick to quote Henry Kissinger, and particularly this Kissinger theme: "As the consequences of all-out war grow more horrible, reliance on it also becomes more absurd -- every increase in destructiveness is purchased at the price of reduced credibility of the retaliatory threat." And then they ask: "Kissinger is one of President Kennedy's most intimate advisers, isn't he?"

Thus Britain, which not long ago was pegging its own defense establishment on the nuclear deterrent alone, repeat alone, now hails the new U.S. interest in conventional warfare and misinterprets it as a waning interest in nuclear arms. Nowhere is this downplay of nuclear capability, so far as its application is concerned, felt so keenly as when one talks of Berlin. British strategists don't want nuclear tactical weapons in the hands of troops in Western Europe, below the Army corps level at least. They believe they are echoing in this President Kennedy's own determination to: 1) keep control of nuclear weaponry in his own hands, 2) to increase the potentialities for conventional warfare, 3) to avoid automatic escalation of a comparatively minor fracas into a nuclear war.

In this environment Mike Mansfield's "free city" proposal hit a friendly audience in London. Lord Home, visiting in Washington, found merit and grounds for study in Mansfield's weird plan while in London Mansfield's ideas were taken far more seriously than deserved often with the rationale that "after all Senator Mansfield must speak for President Kennedy in the Senate." There is thus a wondrous and potentially dangerous allure in the idea of new negotiations on Berlin.

The Anglo-American alliance remains strong so far as Berlin is concerned only in the sense of a determined Western response to extreme, ultimate -- hence unlikely -- Khrushchev tactics this fall. There remains a great shadow area, an area of indecision, in the more likely realm of Soviet-East German political pressure, of gradually increased pressure on the transportation lines, in the response to anticipated Soviet bids for a new round of negotiations.

While it is unlikely that the West will be driven from Berlin by force, the chance remains that it could be negotiated out of Berlin. The West, one can suggest, now must go beyond the repeated assurances to Adenauer and Brandt that we won't be driven out by force. We must demonstrate our determination and ability to stay in Berlin effectively in the face of a far subtler, more sophisticated and more dangerous Communist power play. Herein lies the danger.

John Steele
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